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TOM EDISON JR'S ELECTRIC MULE



OR,

The Snorting Wonder of the Plains.

By PHILIP READE.

CHAPTER I.

TRAIN-ROBBERS FOILED—SNORTER'S FIRST SUCCESS.

A score or more mounted red-sashed desperadoes, armed to the teeth, and accompanied by a heavily laden pack-animal, were toiling by a secret trail up into the recesses of the Diablo Mountains, in El Paso County, North Western Texas.

WITH AN EAR-PIERCING BRAY, THE ELECTRIC MULE THUNDERED TO THE RESCUE OF WHANG BANG!

It was break of day and all bore evidences of a hard and long night's ride.

These men were train-robbers, a section of the large marauding band of Captain Karl, or Karl the Cougar, which was at this time terrorizing the railroads and outlying settlements of Texas, New Mexico, and elsewhere.

No wonder they were tired.

They had held up the east-bound train on the Texas and Pacific at Arispe, fifty miles away to the southward, robbing the express messenger of a great treasure in Mexican silver bullion, which constituted their pack-mule's burden.

But pursuit had thus far been successfully eluded, and they now began to breathe more freely on entering these difficult mountain passes, which formed one of their numerous rendezvous.

"This 'll do fer a starter," exclaimed Red-Eyed Ramon, the leader of the outlaw contingent and Cougar Karl's chief lieutenant, as a halt was at last made on a rocky eminence overlooking a wide extent of country to the north and west. "Be lively now, men! fetch out them fresh hosses, an' let's be pushin' on."

He was an Americanized Mexican—sinister-visaged, dark-eyed, and powerfully built—with the cowboy characteristics of speech and manner.

The men had dismounted somewhat grumblingly, while stripping their tired animals, two or three starting into an adjoining canon for the relay.

"Ain't ye goin' ter camp, Red?" growled Pug Primrose, one of the discontents. "I'm hungry!"

"No, we're not goin' ter camp, an' ye know it," thundered Ramon, furiously. "Ain't Captain Karl expectin' us at Dead Man's Gulch, fifty miles further on, ye dog-faced idiot? Hurry up now," as the fresh horses were being brought out.

"I'm goin' ter hev some hot coffee fust," persisted Pug, rebelliously. "Hyar, some of you fellers, build a fire. I'm goin' back inter this mounting ter try ter shoot a deer."

"Oh, ye air, air ye?" And, with a furious oath, Ramon sprang upon the mutineer, knife in hand. "I'll show ye who's bossin' this hyar section o' ther Red Rippers."

"Be keerful, Ramon," warningly, from the dog-faced man, whose hunting-knife had been whipped from his belt with similar promptness. "I ain't your nigger, whatsum-ever we may all be ter Captain Karl."

Other weapons had been flashed into view, and a free fight might have been the result, had not a voice cried out:

"Good Lord! look at thet mule comin' fer us—'r is it a ellyphant?"

"By Jupiter! it must be thet agent an' Injun-killin' invention of Tom Edison, Jr.'s what we heerd 'bout at El Paso."

The quarrel was over as soon as begun, and, while the work of saddling up the fresh animals was in progress, all eyes were turned to the open country to southward, over which a remarkable looking object was careering toward their fastness at an all but incredible speed.

It was an artificial mule of enormous proportions, to which was attached a queer sort of two-wheeled wagon, containing several men.

More particularly, it was Tom Edison, Jr.'s Electric Mule, Snorter, with chariot attachment, whose wonderfully successful tests had been the newspaper sensation of the frontier for the past fortnight.

But Red-eyed Ramon only laughed grimly, as his band, a fresh pack-mule included, once more filed onward through the mountains.

"Good 'nough!" he sneered. "And then, turning in his saddle, he called out, "Boys!"

"Hullo!" from his subordinates.

"There's on'y five or six men in thet patent mule-chariot, an' we're twenty-two—enough ter eat 'em up."

A howl of approval was his response, and one redoubtable outlaw, Jacko, a gigantic Yucatan negro, marked his enthusiasm in a favorite way of his—by tossing high in the air and catching it again his pet weapon, an enormous machete fashioned like a razor, which it also resembled in keenness.

"Moreover," continued Ramon, the cavalcade meanwhile pursuing its way, "ye mind how our chief, Captain

Karl, hez wanted a chance ter examine this hyar young tenderfoot's 'lectric mule, in order that he may git p'int's from it fer finishin' off thet Steam Centipede what he's been so long buildin' an' potterin' over on ther sly at Fort Worth?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Wall, ain't this a purty good chance ter captur' the critter fer thet purpose?"

Another howl in the affirmative.

Then, on the band coming out upon a comparatively open plain between two rugged ranges, the Electric Mule, having rounded the foot of the range they had just quitted, was again descried, about two miles away, coming dead for them.

"Close up!" was the command, and the outlaws, facing about, formed themselves in serried array on a slight eminence, with their treasure-laden animal in the rear. "Mind now, fellers, don't seem ter want ter swaller these hyar tenderfeet at a single mouthful. Better appear even a leetle skeery fust off. It's ther machine we want more'n we do them."

The queer contrivance charging toward them was certainly, at first glance, rather calculated to excite laughter than terror on the part of such danger-tried and desperate men, and that notwithstanding its colossal size and somewhat demoniac appearance.

Cunningly constructed of iron, steel, and gutta-percha, the Electric Mule was fully ten feet high, and built in proportion. In conformation and action, it was cleverly mule-like. But puffs of smoke issued from the distended nostrils, accompanied by loud snorting sounds, which had, perhaps, suggested the characteristic name, Snorter, which its young inventor had applied to it. Now and then one of its enormous metallic ears cocked itself, and emitted a shrill whistling sound, usually accompanied by a stentorian and diabolical bray from the half-open mouth. Garnet-colored glass globes, emitting a continuous electric glare, were the creature's eyes. The forehead was supplied with a unicorn spear-head. Add to all this that its prevailing color was a dead black, except spectrally white stripes or markings denoting its ribs, and a tufted red-white-and-blue tail, and you have a pretty good idea of the external appearance of the thing.

The wagon, or cart, attached was very large, provided with extraordinary appliances for offense and defense, and contained only Captain Tom, Jr., himself and four men—Lengthy Liston, Hans Donnerblitz, Coonskin Cullen, and Whang-Bang, their Chinese cook—though there was room for several more on occasion.

But the speed of the equipage was not less than fifty miles an hour, its inmates were cool and confident, with their Winchester rifles in readiness; the pounding tramp of the giant steed was like that of an earthquake; and the Red Rippers were speedily made aware that in undertaking the contrivance's capture, they had decidedly bitten off more than they could chew.

"Spread!" yelled Ramon, setting the ball in motion by opening upon the Electric Mule at short range with his Winchester. "The critter's bound ter trip up on this hyar brok'n ground. No mercy fer ther tenderfeet then, but jest pile on an' wipe 'em out."

But the "critter" did not trip up a cent's worth, notwithstanding that it slackened speed considerably in making the ascent.

The outlaws had simultaneously poured in volley after volley from their magazine guns as the Electric Mule dashed, strained, and pounded in between their opening files, but without a particle of effect.

The bullets rattled off the colossal steel like so much harmless hail.

At a touch, the wagon's inmates had surrounded themselves with a close network-defense of steel, through numerous loop-holes in which they responded with a destructive fire from their repeaters.

Then the outlaw leader's horse went to grass skewered from breast to tail by Snorter's forehead-spear.

Jacko, who had reached for the mule's steel-and-rubber jointed throat with his meat-ax of a razor-blade, was promptly seized by the nape of the neck in the sharp teeth of the iron jaws, plucked out of the saddle, and tossed over the monster's head.

Two other horses were overthrown, one of whose riders simultaneously had his skull crushed beneath one of the iron hoofs.

In less than a minute the robbers were in panic-stricken flight for the nearest mountain-side, leaving four of their number prostrate upon the field, and both Ramon and the negro being compelled to trust to their own legs to accompany the flight.

They might have attempted to drive off their pack-animal with them, but that a random bullet had brought it down.

"Hurrah!" shouted Tom Edison, Jr., springing to the ground, as the equipage was brought to a halt beside the fallen pack-mule. "A first success for Snorter, boys, and a stunning one, at that! Here is the stolen treasure intact, which is all we're after at present. Quick now! aboard with the bullion in short order, and then back to Arispe in time for breakfast, and to show the express people and the sheriff's posse what we are fit for in the way of outlaw and Indian smashing! But hello!"

And, while his companions were already transferring the treasure-pack on board the car, he stooped over one of the prostrate outlaws, who proved to have been only stunned by a fall from his horse.

This fellow was thrown aboard as a prisoner, and then, with an extra smoke-puff from Snorter's nostrils, a triumphant bray from his iron lips, and a parting toot or two from either ear, the equipage was off like the wind on their return journey to the southward.

It was only after it had well disappeared around the mountain range that the discomfited outlaws ventured back to recover the riderless horses, look after their dead and mourn over their vanished spoils.

"By Cracky!" cried Jacko, rubbing the back of his neck; "I thought kingdom war comin', shuah, when dat machine jackass nipped me wif him big mouth."

"Wall, we didn't do much mule-capturin', arter all," sneered Pug Primrose, with his exasperating grin. "Seems ter me we mought jess as well staid behind fer breakfast on ther first ridge."

"Now you shut up!" roared Ramon, in a towering rage. "Ther hull Red Ripper band couldn't hev done no better agin thet devil-mule than we did, I don't care a cuss if Captain Karl hisself shed say to ther contrary. For'ard, march!"

But when Dead Man's Gulch was reached at last, Captain Karl seemed less angered at the reported reverse than might have been expected, and was chiefly interested in the gang's description of the appearance, management and action of the Electric Mule itself, so far as they had been able to observe.

He was a medium-sized, narrow-headed man, of more than middle-age, with deep-set, piercing black eyes, having something suggestive of the maniac in their restless glitter, and with his features so completely concealed by a heavy growth of iron-gray, tawny beard as to hint of the terrible animal—the cougar, or American panther—from whose ferocious characteristics he had derived his sobriquet.

"Aha!" he muttered, rubbing his hands together, after obtaining what information he could; "perhaps this is enough for me. If not—well, then let it be Steam Centipede against Electric Mule, and at the earliest opportunity. Red Rippers!" in a loud, clear voice, and springing to his feet.

"Ay, ay, captain!" and his entire band came flocking around him with a promptness that testified to the respect and fear in which he was held. They were fully a hundred in all, white, black, yellow, and red, and of pretty much every variety and nationality of desperadoes under the sun.

"Stand forth; Ramon! when is the next big express treasure expected to quit Fort Worth for San Antone?"

"One week from to-day, captain."

"Good! we'll be on hand to intercept it. And should this inventive young genius from the east attempt any further interference with our affairs—well, he may find himself countered by a patent fighting machine compared with which his electric Snorter is no better than a child's toy."

CHAPTER II.

A VALUABLE CAPTIVE—TROUBLE AHEAD.

To return to Tom Edison, Jr., and his Snorter crew, as we may call them, on the way back to Arispe, the young inventor tried to get some information out of his prisoner but without success.

The captive robber—a singularly handsome, gracefully built young fellow, swarthy-skinned and black-eyed enough to be an Indian half-blood—smiled, shook his head, buttoned up his lip, and, to every question that was put to him, howsoever insinuating or threatening, remained uncommunicative as an oyster.

At last Tom Edison, Jr., smiled in his turn, and, politely offering his prisoner a bunch of cigarettes, which was gratefully accepted, held his peace.

Arispe, near where the train-robbers had effected their nefarious work, was a growing little railroad town, about sixty miles to the south-east of El Paso.

When the Snorter party reached there with their prisoner and the recovered treasure, a great crowd, including the express messenger (who had been wounded by the outlaws), the railroad authorities, and the sheriff's posse (still blown and bad-tempered from the futile pursuit of the bandits), were on hand to greet them with the enthusiasm that can well be imagined.

So were Engineer Jack Piston and Mr. Plugger Poydras of the whilom air-frigate and pirate-hunting days, recently arrived from El Paso, and sad enough, into the bargain, as not having been in the Electric Mule's initial fight.

The prisoner was forthwith handed over to the authorities, and then, after breakfast at the Arispe Live-and-Live Hotel, Major Pat Kelly, the sheriff of El Paso, sprang on board the electric equipage, which was again under way for starting out on fresh adventures, and grasped the young inventor's hand.

"Captain Edison!" he exclaimed; "pray accept my apologies. I own that I somewhat pooh-hoohed the trial trips of your Electric Mule up there at Paso, but I give in now, and frankly. The Snorter is a trump card, and there is my hand on it. Have you any objection to explain to me the workings of this truly wonderful invention?"

"By no means, my dear fellow," replied Captain Tom, Jr., with his accustomed urbanity. "Here we are, just as we came to you from my workshop at Pusherville, New York, a little more than a fortnight ago, only now, with the addition of having been put to the practical test and found not wanting."

He accordingly went on to explain the vehicle first. In addition to being very roomy, it was a most solidly constructed affair, much heavier than even half a dozen live horses or mules would have cared to travel before, but the body and limbs of the Electric Mule were as powerful as they were incapable of fatigue.

The wagon was all fashioned in small but neatly fitting sections, and all the joints were made of rubber; so that the very swiftest time over the roughest of roads, and often over no road at all, would not subject the occupants to any very severe jolting.

"Here, you see, in the back of the wagon," said Tom, Jr., "I have my batteries for the constant generation of electricity in any amount, as needed. The pipes, which you observe running along the shafts, supply the electricity for putting in motion the complicated machinery contained in the body and limbs of the artificial mule. This power will be used when the mule is in harness, for which sort of work he is, perhaps, more perfectly adapted."

"But, bless you, sheriff! he can go under the saddle almost equally well on occasion!"

"Then the power will be spontaneously generated in and for his own interior, by means of those cranks which you observe protruding just above his withers; while the wagon can also be rendered self-acting on its own account, though without anything like the sixty-mile-an-hour speed that can be easily reeled off with Snorter in the shafts."

"You observe the bunks fitted up for myself and crew here, just abaft our fighting deck, as one might term it? We can make both a house and a fort of the wagon for weeks at a time if necessary.

"This little compartment in the middle contains our water, provisions, and cooking apparatus.

"Next behind it is the arms, or weapon room. And then this little trap or hatch leads down into a strong compartment, or chest, containing a whole lot of new infernal contrivances, with which I intend to knock either banded Indians or hostile redskins cold, as the occasion may demand."

The sheriff was examining the structure very interestingly, when a great mob of furious men was seen surging hastily at the upper end of the street.

"Jupiter! they're after lynchin' that prisoner you brought in," he exclaimed, jumping out of the wagon and his horse almost at a single bound. "We'll see about that!" And off he dashed.

"That is true," cried Captain Tom Jr., "and so will I do to it."

Snorter was already harnessed to his car in front of the hotel.

"All aboard!" the crew, now including Jack Piston and Plugger Poydras, sprang to their places on board, the first-named leaping to the driver's seat and grasping the electric guiding lines. "That rascal must not be lynched, if saving him will open his lips."

Away dashed the Electric Mule up the road, but a dozen or more of his giant, ringing strides sufficing to bring the equipage before the mob-surrounded building.

The sheriff had been forced back at the revolver's point, his protests unheeded.

There was a savage cheer, and several men issued with the prisoner, who was composedly indifferent to his fate, notwithstanding that the improvised noose was already about his neck.

"Stop this!" cried Tom Edison, Jr., in his clear, decisive tones, and then, as Snorter was urged through the mob, knocking its members unceremoniously right and left, he reached out from the car, placing his hand on the captive's shoulder. "Look here, my friends, I've a better use for this man than hanging him. Therefore, I want him."

There was a chorus of protesting howls, while weapons flashed angrily in view on every hand.

But the youthful inventor-adventurer managed to make himself heard, and then in an eloquent and diplomatic little speech, in which he cleverly backed his personal claim to the prisoner by the public service which he had performed in recovering the stolen treasure, he gained his point.

"Hooray fer Tom Edison, Jr., an' his Electric Mule," shouted a laughing voice at the close of the address. "Hooray fer the snorting wonder of the plains! Boys, we can't afford ter let this thing go from El Paso County, Texas."

The hurrah was given with a will by the now dispersing mob, and Tom, Jr., bore his prize back with him to the hotel.

Shortly after this, Sheriff Pat Kelly sought him out, for the purpose of grasping his hand afresh.

"My boy!" he exclaimed: "ye've just done a bigger thing than ye did when ye recaptured that silver bullion from ther Red Rippers."

"What is that, sheriff?" inquired Tom Edison, Jr., surprised.

"Got the best of a Texas lynching crowd, with its prey in its clutch, God bless ye! Now, what are ye going ter do 'th the cuss?"

"Make use of him, if possible, toward wiping out the entire Red Ripper band. No objection to that, I hope?"

"None whatever, my boy; though ye'll be likely to find their Captain Karl a hard nut to crack. His band is numerous and desperate, and he has long defied the entire border from Northern Texas up clean over the Colorado line."

"And quite long enough, I should say! But I will communicate with you as to my fresh intentions later on."

And, with another grasp of the hand, Captain Tom, Jr., went to the room in which he had placed his prisoner under guard.

The latter, having discarded his hunting jacket, red sash and boots, and availed himself of the opportunity to wash up and make a square meal that had been furnished him, was sleeping on a pallet as peacefully as a baby, notwithstanding the terribly "close call" to which he had been so recently subjected.

"A brave youth!" said Tom, Jr., to himself, once more remarking the singular beauty and gracefulness of the sleeping outlaw, and he touched his shoulder.

The result was as he had hoped.

The young outlaw was no longer either surly or uncommunicative.

"You took me from the lynchers—you saved my life!" he cried, springing up, honest gratitude in his face and eyes. "Young sir, villain as he has been, Hairtrigger Hal is from this hour your servant and friend."

"That is your name, then?"

"Yes."

"How long have you belonged to the Red Rippers?"

"But a few months. By choice, senor, I am a hunter, not a robber. I am an Apache half-breed, as you may have guessed. I suspect Captain Karl of having murdered my father—a white rustler, and a true man—but I am not sure of it. For this reason I joined the Red Rippers—to be sure in that regard, and for vengeance in case of need."

Further conversation disclosed many interesting details of Hairtrigger Hal's character and history.

"Why did you not confide all this to me at first?" demanded Tom Edison, Jr.

"I did not know you at first as I do now, captain," was the reply. "Besides, my only first thought was to escape from you and rejoin the Rippers in the interest of this private affair of mine with Karl, the Cougar."

"Your name would imply that you are a good marksman?"

"I am a dead shot, senor, and I never saw a quicker one."

"You will have a better chance for your vengeance—quest with me than you could have with the Rippers. Will you join my Snorter crew?"

"Yes—now I will, and for all I am worth."

"There's my hand on it, then, though I warn you that you will be under the strictest sort of watch till we are sure of you."

"That is to be expected." And, the hand-clasp being given, Hairtrigger Hal hurriedly resumed the garments he had discarded.

"Where is the band's principal headquarters here in El Paso County?" Tom Edison, Jr., next demanded.

"At Dead Man's Gulch, in the Diablo Mountains," was the prompt response; "fifty miles beyond where you wiped out Red-eyed Ramon and the rest of us this morning."

"Is it advisable to attack the position?"

"Decidedly not, senor," earnestly. "Even against your Electric Mule outfit, the place, defended by the whole Red Ripper band, is impregnable. A better plan is to intercept their next raid on the railroad."

"When and where is that to be?"

"Somewhere south of Fort Worth, one week from today, when the next big express treasure is expected to leave that point for San Antone."

"Do you know the locality where the hold-up will be attempted?"

"No, but I can guess pretty close to it, after thinking the thing over," thoughtfully. "But I know this much, captain: It is about that time that Captain Karl expects to trot out his Steam Centipede, as he calls it, in the interest of his cut-throat crew."

"His Steam Centipede?" repeated Tom Edison, Jr., in astonishment. And then, after further questioning on the subject, he said to himself: "None but my old enemy and rival, Louis Gubrious, the whilom air-pirate, could think of inventing such a thing in opposition to my Electric Mule. Can he be still alive, and none other than this outlaw leader, Captain Karl, himself? It seems impossible. And yet—however, if possible, so much the grander test for the Snorting Wonder of the Plains."

An hour later, when the Snorter outfit, with Hairtrigger Hal added to its crew, was again starting out of town to the northward, Major Pat Kelly, who had exchanged part-

ing words with the young inventor but a short time previous, came galloping furiously up to the equipage from the other end of the station, waving his hat.

CHAPTER III.

A THRILLING INCIDENT—THE STAKED PLAINS.

Captain Tom, Jr., signed to Jack Piston, who was in the driver's seat to rein in the Electric Mule.

"What is it, sheriff?" he inquired, as the official came up alongside.

"You're now off Fort Worth-ways, eh?" cried Kelly.

"Yes; though by a rather roundabout route to northward."

"Well, seek out the Red Rippers, if you must," excitedly; "but in any event avoid the Llano Estacado, or Staked Plains."

"What for?"

"Immense Injun outbreak—dispatch just in from El Paso—red devils sweepin' southward burnin' an' murderin' all before 'em—Captain Karl supposed to be at bottom of trouble," cried the major, disjointedly.

"Thanks for information, major," said Tom Edison, Jr., cheerfully. "Goodby."

"Where are ye headin' for first, Captain Edison?"

"For the Staked Plains."

"What!" with a sort of gasp.

But Snorter and his crew were already off like the wind, over the rolling prairies to the northward.

A little later on, while they were still whirling over the ground at a mile-a-minute clip, Hairtrigger Hal, whose weapons had been restored to him, caused a mild sensation by taking off his distinguishing red sash, and rebinding it about him wrong side out, which was blue instead of red.

"Friends," he said, in his melodiously calm voice and self-contained way, "I am one of you, and an honest man, clean up to the hilt from this time on, if ye'll only let me be."

This changed in his favor the impression which had been decidedly averse to him at the outset.

The first night in camp was passed without any disturbing incident.

On the following morning, after passing leisurely through a long and tortuous defile, the equipage, on emerging out upon a valley-plain, came in view of an extraordinary scene that was enacting on the summit-edge of an adjoining precipice.

A crowd of red-sashed outlaws were there assembled, in the act of hanging a man, who stood among them, his arms pinioned behind him, the fatal noose about his neck.

The Snorter party had come to a halt in the valley below without being perceived by the participants in the impending tragedy.

Hairtrigger Hal seized and leveled the field-glass which Tom Edison, Jr., had significantly pressed into his hand, exclaiming:

"Carambas! it's Big Wolf Wallatee they're hanging, who deserted some weeks ago. A good man, too, who knows more about Captain Karl's Steam Centipede than any other Ripper, and—Ha!" as the victim was seen to be swung off from an overhanging limb, immediately after which his outlaw executioners were seen to disappear.

"What!" cried Captain Tom, Jr., excitedly, while Snorter was again put in motion toward the foot of the cliff; "if rescued, then, this man might give us some valuable advice?"

"Yes, capitano. Wait! there is but one chance—it is this!"

And, with the equipage still on the jump, Hairtrigger Hal threw his Winchester to his shoulder with a lightning-like movement, loosening out a perfect stream of successive shots, aimed directly above the dangling victim's head.

"Good boy!" grunted Coonskin Cullen, approvingly, as the rope, though a thick one, was severed by the bullets, precipitating its strangling burden to the bottom of the crag. "They didn't hairtrigger your name fer nothin', me lad; though I fear thet ther poor devil yonder hez only saved his neck at the expense of his back."

So it proved.

The man lay perfectly motionless where he had fallen, and when they reached him he was dying from a broken back.

He recognized Hairtrigger Hal, however, and seemed to understand that he had fallen among friends.

"Papers—valuable papers—under my left-foot sock," he gasped. "I was tryin' ter 'scape with 'em ter—ter the Fort Worth 'thorities when the Rippers nabbed me. Oh, if they might only bring Captain Karl ter ther rope! but—but—" And he was gone.

The papers were found concealed on the man's body, as hinted.

"Boys!" cried Captain Tom, Jr., exultingly, while hastily looking over them; "we're in luck. These papers only describe Captain Karl's Steam Centipede in full, and prove him to be our old air-pirate enemy, Louis Gubbe, under another name. It does seem incredible, to be sure, but I recognize his handwriting—the subject-matter of these papers proves it also—there can be no mistake!"

Then, the remains of the unfortunate Big Wolf Wallatee having been hastily buried, the swift-prancing journey behind the redoubtable Electric Mule was resumed.

The next objective point headed for, after getting out of the mountains, was the staked plains wilderness, two hundred miles away to the north-east.

It was Hairtrigger Hal's impression that Captain Karl was already traversing that country (after leaving the punishment of the captured deserter to the care of Red-eyed Ramon, his chief lieutenant), to look after the Indian insurrection on his way to Fort Worth via the railway.

Snorter was put to his utmost speed accordingly, and shortly after noonday the party reached the Painted Rocks surrounding Seminole Wells and the various salt lakes in the very heart of the desolate Staked Plains.

Here they were taking their midday meal in the shadow of the great rocks when Plugger Poydras, who was on lookout duty on the top of one of them, yelled out, "Injuns!" and, firing off his gun, started for camp on the dead run.

In fact, they were all—with a single exception—just in time to spring on board the car, and avail themselves of its network defenses, when the blood-thirsty savages were swarming upon them from every side, seemingly in countless numbers, with brandished weapons and demoniac yells.

"Steady, all!" shouted Tom Edison, Jr., in his clear-ringing voice of command, opening the death-dance with his Winchester, while Jack Piston was gathering up the guiding lines and the others were springing to their respective loop-holes: "Into the open ground for fighting space, and meantime let the red devils have their belly-fuls."

Bullets and arrows had already rattled harmlessly against the equipage by the hundred, many of the shafts sticking fast into the steel network, while some of the savages were trying to swarm over the latter, tomahawk in hand.

But the deadly Winchesters were at work from within, and almost at the same instant the Electric Mule was in motion, with his ear-piercing bray, shaking off his clustering foes, as dewdrops from the lion's mane.

One Indian was skewered high in air on his unicorn forehead-spear, another was caught up, squirming, in his iron teeth, and then away he sprang and thundered for the open, pounding and smashing the prostrated redskins beneath his remorseless tread and the chariot wheels.

It was like the storied progress of the Juggernaut car!

In the meantime, the Indians having been all whipped out from among the rocks, or exterminated therein, Snorter was again headed for the open plain where several hundred of them had rallied for a last stand against their novel and altogether extraordinary foe.

However, just as the adventurers were once more charging among them with tremendous effect, a squadron of Uncle Sam's cavalry attacked their flank from the southward, and in less than a minute the entire horde was put into irretrievable and panic-stricken flight, with indiscriminate slaughter.

"Bully for the Snorting Wonder of the Plains!" shouted the young West Pointer in command of the new-comers,

reming in his panting steed long enough to express his gratification. "A few more such inventions, and our Indian uprisings would be at an end. But the red devils are still rampant off to the eastward yonder, and—" the remaining words were lost as he spurred off with his gallant boys in Blue in pursuit of the flying foe.

"To the eastward it is, then," exclaimed Captain Tom, springing, field-glass in hand, to an elevated position by the driver's seat, while the Wonder was set off thundering in that direction. "We exterminate but to save!"

As the team flew off over the strange staked, crockery-strewn and sun-baked plains at its more than railroad speed, the crew set to work industriously to clean up, catch breath, and recuperate generally after their tough work.

But the respite was a brief one.

"An emigrant team with Indians in full chase," announced the young inventor, after less than half an hour's run. "On with the dance."

CHAPTER IV.

MORE INDIAN FIGHTING—AN OLD ENEMY IN A NEW GUISE.

It was a single emigrant team that was seen approaching, the horses on a dead run, and at least fifty mounted Indians following in hot pursuit.

The settler was cowering in the front of his canvas-covered wagon, with his wife and baby at his side, lashing the flanks of his frantic steed.

The sight of the Electric Mule thundering to their rescue seemed to still further bewilder them, but then anything was preferable to the tender mercies of their pursuers, and the next instant Captain Tom, Jr.'s reassuring shout was in their ears.

"Fall in behind us, and take it easy," he cheerily cried. "We'll attend to those chaps."

"Beware of 'em, sir!" yelled the settler in response, while dashing past. "Thar's a white man leading 'em."

But by this time Snorter was among the Indians, careering this way and that, while the rifles behind him were emptying saddles at every pop.

"That's Captain Karl!" cried Hairtrigger Hal, pointing to a white hunter who was careering here, there, and everywhere conspicuously in the thick of the fray, for the savages were dauntlessly persistent even in the face of defeat.

"Ay, and it's Air-Pirate Louis Gubrious, too," thundered Tom Edison, Jr., while a yell of execration went up from his crew, who also made the recognition. "Our old enemy in a new guise."

The outlaw leader heard the words, and laughed mockingly, but the next surge in the attacking redskins hid him momentarily from view.

This attack was also rolled back victoriously, and with great slaughter.

Then there was a jolting halt in the car's progress, as one great wheel sank clean to the hub in a prairie-dog excavation, and the savages rallied again correspondingly.

"They're stuck fast!" roared the ex-air-pirate, triumphantly. "Here, Jacko, lead 'em up on that side. Tom Edison, Jr., and his Electric Mule must be destroyed at any cost."

The Yucatan negro was now for the first time perceived at his outlaw master's side, a revolver in one hand, his giant razor in the other, and together they began to marshal the savages for a last attack upon the temporarily disabled equipage.

But Tom Edison, Jr., was not at all dismayed, notwithstanding that the fighting car was half-tilted over to one side, while Snorter was pawing, snorting, and straining ineffectually in the twisted hills.

"Quick, Lengthy, my chain-armor suit and helmet," he exclaimed; the articles being produced and assumed almost as soon as demanded. "Now, Jack Piston, freedom for Snorter, and my long battle-ax-lance. Take care of yourselves."

The next instant the Electric Mule was free of the vehicle with Captain Tom Edison, Jr., mail-clad, on his back, and driving headlong into the enemy, lance in rest.

Jacko was the first to dodge the on-coming thrust, and, wheeling his horse to one side, make a tremendous up-cutting slash at the mailed car-er with his exaggerated razor blade.

Simultaneously, however, he was knocked flying out of the saddle by a dextrous side-blow from the pole-ax at the spear-head's jointure with the lance-end; while Captain Karl was himself unhorsed by a similar side-blow in the opposite direction, and several wounded Indian's skulls were as instantly crushed beneath the planted hoof-prints of the metallic steed.

Then three savages, chancing to be in line, were picked from their ponies' backs and skewered through and through on the end of the spear.

And, as Captain Tom, Jr., at the same time loosened out with the seven-shooter in his left hand, dropping a redskin at every shot, Snorter disemboweled a couple more almost at a single plunging thrust with his forehead-horn, and bit the top of the head almost clean off yet another with one crunching snap of his ponderous jaws.

The savages gave way in every direction, fairly appalled, but as Tom, Jr., wheeled his giant steed, it was only to see his followers hard pressed by yet another hostile group while in the act of lifting their car-wheel out of the hole.

Another sweeping charge of the Electric Mule, however, lance in rest and with a fresh revolver in full play, speedily changed all this, and most beneficially.

The savages fled in sudden and final panic toward some mountain land to southward, Captain Karl and Jacko, who had succeeded in obtaining fresh mounts, alone bringing up their rear reluctantly, in order to howl back their impotent defiance.

"My turn will yet come, Tom Edison, Jr.," roared out the former. "You conquered me in the mastery of the air—wait and see if I do not conquer your Snorting Wonder of the Plains with a yet more formidable engine of destruction." And off he galloped, shaking his fist.

"Yes, we'll wait," said Captain Tom, Jr., springing off Snorter's back and patting his iron neck as affectionately as he might have done with a flesh-and-blood steed; "and the sooner the better."

When Snorter had again been hitched up, and all were once more on board for a fresh start, the rescued settler came driving up to express his gratitude.

"Where is the nearest military post?" briefly demanded Captain Tom, Jr., after listening to his story.

The man named one, as being fifty miles distant to the southward.

"All right! we'll see you safely thither. It will be your own fault if you again trust yourself, your wife and baby, defenseless in this savage infested wilderness."

The party then headed away in the direction indicated, at a leisurely enough pace for the Wilsons, as the rescued couple called themselves, to keep company.

There was but a small force there for the protection of the surrounding settlers, and the young inventor could not resist the appeal that he should tarry in aid of the general defense.

Three days were spent in active and almost constant skirmishes with the redskins.

Then, matters having somewhat quieted, Captain Tom, Jr., who had been in telegraphic communication with Sheriff Kelly from El Paso, was surprised and gratified to receive the following dispatch from him, dated not at that town, but at San Antonio:

"Rippers may attack big express treasure at Waco, crossing of Brazos, to-morrow night. Shall be on hand with posse. If you can get to Fort Worth first, to head off Steam Centipede, better do so."

Two hours after the receipt of this dispatch, the Electric Mule, with his gallant crew on the jump for fresh hard fighting, was headed for Fort Worth, nearly four hundred miles distant at his swiftest pace.

The run was made at night, over a pretty level country for the most part, and such as had not as yet been much disturbed by the Indians.

Still, numerous streams had to be forded, none of the party was entirely familiar with the region traversed, and by dawn of the following day they were still a hundred miles short of their destination when they came upon a dozen cowboys on the point of being overcome and mas-

sacred by a howling horde of savages, who were closely besieging them in a small canon of Buzzard Park Mountain, on the Salt Fork of the Brazos River.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Hairtrigger Hal, peering forward through the dim half-light of the gloaming, while Snorter was at once heading away to the rescue; "there's more than one Red Ripper among those attacking Injuns, too. I can see the flash of the scarlet sashes."

"The more the merrier," observed Captain Tom, Jr., grimly. "Rally, all, now! And, Jack," to Piston, at the reins, "you can see yonder the best place to fall upon the red devils' rear."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

Jack Piston had seen, and his direction of the Electric Mule's onset was as true as a die.

Quickly he was among them like a besom of destruction, knocking them, horse and men, in every direction, while the death dealing Winchesters were pouring out their leaden messengers from either side of the panoplied car with frightful effect.

"Hooray!" shouted a voice from the inside of the canon. "It's that 'lectric critter er Tom Edison, Jr.'s, boys, an' we're saved. Now's our time!"

Then the besieged cowboys came charging out of the canon on their hardy bronchos, which had fortunately been kept out of harm's way during the siege, loosening out with gun and pistol as they came.

Thus taken between two fires, and already panic-stricken by the Electric Mule's unexpected swoop upon them, the savages broke and fled, leaving a large percentage of their number dead on the ground, and the victory was complete.

"Weren't there some Red Rippers among the Indians attacking you?" asked Tom Edison, Jr., after the preliminary explanations had been exchanged.

"Not a doubt of it, sir," was the reply. "An' I'm purty sure I shot one of 'em out er ther saddle 'ith me own hand. Hallo! that's ther renegade hound yonder what one er your men is tryin' ter git speech out of."

It was Hairtrigger Hill, who was bending anxiously over a desperately wounded red-sashed outlaw, and the latter fell back and expired as Captain Tom, Jr., and others gathered around the pair.

Hairtrigger Hal's face was pale and set with a terribly stern look, as he rose, seeming to abstain with difficulty from spurning the dead villain with his foot.

"I've made sure of something I've long wanted to know," he said, in a low voice.

Afterward, when the Snorter crew were once more speeding on their way, followed by the hurrahs and blessings and godspeeds of the rescued cattlemen, the young man was somewhat more communicative as to what he had learned from the dying brigand's lips.

"Three men were directly concerned in my father's murder, though I've only to-day found that out," was the substance of what he vouchsafed to say. "He was treacherously made away with on the headwaters of the Canadian. His murderers were Captain Karl, himself, Red-eyed Ramon, and Bowie-knife Blakelock—the scoundrel who this morning gave me the information on his dying oath. Fate brought me to that man's side; only let Fate give the other two into my hands, and I ask nothing more of earth or heaven."

When half the remaining distance to Fort Worth was accomplished, and the Snorter equipage was toiling somewhat slowly through a half-mountainous range, Lengthy Liston, who had clambered to the top of a neighboring rock for a better outlook ahead, yelled out, excitedly:

"Good Lord! what's this comin' over the plain yonder? It looks like a locomotive on legs, or a cockroach on wheels, I don't know which."

CHAPTER V.

"WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK"—AN EXTRAORDINARY DUEL.

Snorter having been brought to a halt, Captain Tom, Jr., was out of the car and at Lengthy's side on the lookout rock, field-glass in hand, in short order.

"It's the Steam Centipede, sure as a gun," he shouted, delightedly, while bringing the glass to bear. "Jeewhillikins, but she's a buster, too."

They hurriedly returned to the car, Snorter was pushed on through the defile, and in a few moments, another halt having been made on an eminence overlooking the plain, the entire party were in view of the strange object.

Disappointment was the first impression on the part of all—in that the outlaw inventor of the Steam Centipede had succeeded in getting out of Fort Worth, and thus taking regularly to the war-path with his novel engine of destruction, without being intercepted on the threshold of his career, as had been fondly hoped.

But to this impression there speedily succeeded a sense of joy, the fierce joy of soon having their own monster of the plains, Snorter, the thus far invincible, perhaps soon brought face to face, battle-front to battle-front, with a mechanical adversary worthy of his prowess.

But the Steam Centipede itself, what was it like?

As well as could be observed, like nothing so much as what its name implied, a many-jointed artificial centipede of enormous proportions—perhaps twenty feet or more in length, and standing seven or eight feet above the ground. It seemed to be supported by both legs and wheels, which, if something less than a hundred in number, nevertheless moved harmoniously, and caused the entire bulk to bump along over the ground with a slightly undulating motion and at a velocity fully equaling that of the Electric Mule itself.

Furthermore, the creature seemed to be composed of scales or joints of glittering, polished steel, steam issued in regular puffs from its distended nostrils, smoke in a steady stream from an orifice where its tail should have been, had it been blessed with such an appendage; a pair of enormous octopus-like hooks, or feelers, reached tremulously out from beneath the hyena-like snout, there was a wide-branching metallic horn at either side of the head; and, controlled entirely from within, without a sign of human pilot or crew in sight, the extraordinary structure darted here and there about the plain with the utmost ease and intelligence, as if merely for the purpose of freely testing its powers.

A feeling of half-dread, half-stupefaction succeeded to the pleasurable satisfaction which the aspect of the Steam Centipede had first given rise to on the part of some of its beholders.

"I only think of one thing," volunteered Hairtrigger Hal, on his part—"that my mortal foe, Karl the Cougar, controls yonder fighting contrivance. I'll have his life, or he'll have to have mine. We're bound to win."

"Good!" cried Captain Tom, Jr., slapping the last speaker on the back, and then grasping sturdy Jack Piston's hand, while gazing reprovingly at the others. "My friends, the duel is at hand—the duel to the death between the Electric Mule and the Steam Centipede. So, get yourselves in readiness for the scrimmage without further delay."

He then gave a number of commands, which were quickly and quietly fulfilled, the buoyant spirits of the Snorter crew rapidly rising to the heroic point again.

In pursuance of one of these commands, an oak sapling, about twenty feet long and six inches in diameter at the middle, was cut, trimmed, and shod with a steel head and point at the tip, after the manner of a lance.

This was lashed along Snorter's back at one side, the network defenses were run up around the car, and then the mule being once more given his head, a descent was made upon the open plain.

The Centipede was at this juncture on the further side of the plain, with a ragged jumble of small mountains at his rear, and a small stream flowing midway between.

It was probably the first intimation that those in the Centipede's interior had had of their enemy's presence.

At all events, as Snorter came thundering on to the charge, the Centipede, after making a feint toward meeting him half-way, suddenly retreated, crab-fashion, with tremendous velocity, and then came to a pause at the bottom of a pretty steep precipice, bristling and half-doubled up and humped together, anticipative of the attack.

As this was done, about a dozen outlaws, with Captain Karl and Jacko conspicuously at the front, suddenly popped up into view out of an opening, and ranged themselves astride of the thing's back, one behind the other.

Each was armed with rifle and long hunting-lance or

car, of the ordinary size, while the giant negro alone, in addition, sported his extraordinary razor-fashioned meat-axe as you might call it, which he brandished and flashed about in the morning sunlight most blood-thirstily, while giving utterance to astounding yells.

"Aha! we may be able to change the tune of that Ethiopian howl a little," said Captain Tom, Jr., cheerfully, as the Snorter team dashed forward. "Now, boys, is the time! and then remember instructions."

The separating stream was then dashed into and crossed, after which there was an abrupt halt.

Then, as Snorter was loosened out of the thills, the young inventor, invested in his chain-armor, sprang aside of him, and seized the mighty spear to steady it—it resembled a young telegraph-pole more than anything else. While Hairtrigger Hal bestrode the iron steed directly behind him, a Winchester rifle in his hands, another one across his knees.

In this position they pushed forward alone on mule-back to the charge, while the car, being put in motion by Jack Piston on its individual account, followed more leisurely, port-holes open, and the remaining riflemen at their station.

Just at this moment, also, a large number of the Red Rippers on horseback made their appearance, issuing out of a canon just at the back of the Steam Centipede's position, and held themselves in readiness to support their great artificial auxiliary in the approaching contest.

The chief interest, though, as a matter of course, was centered in the tilt between the Electric Mule and the Steam Centipede.

"We seem to have the entire Red Ripper gang opposed to us," observed Captain Tom, Jr., as, spurring on like the wind, he kept a steadier hold on his lance in rest. "If so, so much the better. Hal," to his companion at his shoulder, "how are you feeling?"

"Primed for blood and for vengeance, captain," was the encouraging response.

"Good!"

But when the opposing machines were still several rods apart, Captain Karl requested a parley by a wave of the hand, and Snorter was accordingly reined in to a rearing halt.

"Captain Edison," shouted out the bandit chief.

"Here to you!" was the gallant reply.

"This contest, I warn you beforehand, is not of my seeking."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's a contest of my seeking."

"Have at you, then," with an enraged howl.

And at the same instant the Centipede was sent rushing out to the charge, with the speed of a mad locomotive on a down-grade.

Snorter had also again been started forward at full tilt.

The shock of collision was much like that of two runaway railroad motors coming head-on together on a single track.

Tom, Jr.'s immense spear flew into splinters after striking the Centipede squarely in the forehead, ripping off its left-horn, while the shock caused both animals, so to speak, to simultaneously recoil, with the sound of a hundred anvils beaten by as many sledge-hammer blows.

The next instant, however, Snorter, jabbing his unicorn, or forehead-spear, deep into his antagonist's left eye, seized his prehensile snout between his iron teeth, hanging on like grim death, while partly rearing up and pawing out furiously at his scaly head-piece with his tremendous hoofs.

But, nothing daunted, the Centipede had in the meantime got a choking hold on Snorter's neck with one octopian feeler, while trying to trip him up with the other, and getting in a deep, goring thrust in the ribs with his undamaged horn.

At the same time, the respective riders of the battle-locked monsters were opening out upon each other with their Winchesters and revolvers, though without much damage on either side, seeing that the outlaws, no less than Tom, Jr., were provided individually with some sort of bullet-proof armor, while Hairtrigger Hal was sheltered behind his principal.

In the meantime, though, the disengaged Snorter car

had greatly surprised the outlaw horsemen by dashing among them, of its own action, and with unexpected spryness, and, as they were not provided with coats of mail, the deadly rifles at work from inside the steel netting speedily caused murderous havoc among them.

At the most exciting juncture of the struggle for the mastery between the Electric Mule and the Steam Centipede their respective riders even so far forgot themselves as to urge on their champions with shouts and yells of encouragement as might have been the case with flesh and blood monsters.

But this sort of thing could not, in the nature of things, last for any considerable length of time.

Captain Tom, Jr., had just managed to reach over with the butt of his splintered sapling and fetch the Yucatan outlaw a staggering blow with it, while Hairtrigger Hal, having pumped the bullets out of both his Winchesters, was about dashing over the monsters' interlocked heads, tomahawk in hand, so as to engage Captain Karl at closer quarters, when the grappling machine-giants suddenly burst away from each other, to recover breath, as it were.

CHAPTER VI.

A DRAWN BATTLE—THE RACE FOR BLUE CUT.

Both monsters had been considerably damaged in the tussel, but were still full of fight.

But Snorter was by long odds the fresher of the two, and indeed, as Captain Tom, Jr., again turned on the force-cranks that sent him bounding and snorting forward for a renewal of the contest, his terrible unicorn forehead-spear dropped to a thrusting level, his saucer-eyes blazing, and his pibroch of a battle-bray again thundering out from between his gnashing teeth, his strange antagonist unexpectedly turned tail and took to flight, straight toward the steep-sloping cliff which he had constituted as his first base of action.

Snorter was after him like a shot, securing a firm biting hold on one of the after plates, but a hissing, blinding gush of steam and smoke, bursting out from where the tail should have been, caused him to relinquish it and again recoil.

When the cloud cleared away the Steam Centipede was next seen climbing straight up the all but perpendicular face of the crag, where the Electric Mule could not hope to follow in pursuit, while the outlaw horsemen, having had enough of fighting with the electric car, had galloped off up the narrow and precipitous canon, leaving a dozen of their number and as many horses dead and dying upon the field.

"Let them go for the present," coolly commented Captain Tom, Jr., reuniting his separate force, while the defeated Centipede was disappearing over the top of the cliff. "We've whipped them fairly on ground of their own choosing, and that must content us until we know to a certainty exactly where to counter their intended attack on the San Antone treasure-train this evening."

A review of the results of the battle was yet more encouraging.

As to the chief combatants in the first place, it was evident from the lop-sided manner of his retreat that "Centy" had been badly crippled in the fore-legs and head-piece, if not severely injured internally, while, with the exception of having one of his ears chewed off, Snorter was quite as good as new, with one of his antagonist's dismembered feeler-hooks still hanging round his proudly arching and uninjured neck.

The car was, moreover, wholly uninjured, and with the exception of a few bullet scratches, not one of the Snorter crew had sustained any mishap.

Nine of the outlaws were dead, and three dying of their wounds, upon the desperately contested field.

From one of these latter, who had been very friendly with Hairtrigger Hal during the latter's affiliation with the band, it was learned that Captain Karl had definitely decided to attack the treasure train that evening at Blue Cut, a creek-crossing twenty miles south of Waco, on the Brazos, and about sixty to the south-east of the present battle-field.

Snorter was then once more harnessed to the car, and the equipage proceeded swiftly around the base of the small mountain range, in which the defeated outlaws had disappeared, with the hope of cutting them off in their break for the Blue Cut rendezvous.

But they were again too late, at least in part.

They only reached the plain on the easterly side of the range in time to see the outlaw horsemen galloping swiftly away in the distance.

As it was evident, however, that the Steam Centipede still held to his mountain retreat, the Snorter party quietly went into camp on the open plain, to secure a much-needed rest, and on guard-duty against the monster's escape.

"This is about the best we can do for the present," observed Captain Tom, Jr., while the halt was being made. "As against Sheriff Kelly and his posse, the mounted outlaws cannot hope to make any headway in their project without the aid of their demoniac steam devil, which seems to require their leader's exclusive supervision in order to engineer it effectively. So that, if we only manage to destroy or stand off the Centipede, we shall probably be able to save the treasure train."

But this was not to be.

And, indeed, the young inventor's followers could not help observing that he spoke of the Centipede with a much graver measure of respect than at the outset.

Nor was this without reason.

For, notwithstanding that the outlaw-controlled automaton had been defeated by the Electric Mule, it had come very near holding its own in the novel contest, and with better luck might very possibly turn the scale in a second or third struggle for the superiority.

However, the Snorter adventurers were in high spirits over their victory, and they now proceeded to make the most of the rest and relaxation afforded them.

They had gone into camp on the eastern plain about the middle of the forenoon.

About three in the afternoon the heavens rapidly clouded over, and there were indications of a heavy storm approaching from the south-east.

Then, while everything was being made snug and rain-proof on board the car, Plugger Poydras, on lookout duty on a rise in the undulating plain not far away, signaled that steam was rising out of the neighboring mountains, as if the Centipede might be making ready for a spurt for freedom.

Almost at the same instant Coonskin Cullen, similarly perched on the other side of the camp, yelled out "Injuns!" at the top of his lungs, fired off his gun for good measure, and came running in.

"All aboard!" was the clear-voiced command. "And remember, one and all, Indians or no Indians, we are not to have our attention diverted from blocking the Steam Centipede's passage at all hazards."

All were on board, and in readiness for any and every sort of emergency, in less time than it takes to tell it.

Then there was an impatient pawing of the mighty hoofs, a snorting bray of thunderous note from the iron jaws, a melodious toot from the sole remaining, wide-flapping jackass-ear, a triumphant whisk of the red-white-and-blue tail, and Snorter, the invincible, was once more off, with his fighter crammed chariot at his back.

Hurrah!

Hardly had the party got in motion before the Indians whom Coonskin had signaled—fifty or more full-armed mounted bucks in war-paint—issued from the wooded mountain-spurs to the southward, and came charging on, with the evident intention of masking the Steam Centipede's flight across the plain from a point further along, whence the puffs of steam and smoke could by this time be plainly descried.

"Hold hard!" roared Captain Tom, Jr., as, after a brief curving swing, in order to loosen out his mighty-jointed legs, Snorter was sent thundering forward to meet the foe. "Rifles and hand-grenades to the fore—then that shell-gun in position, some of you—and then, remember!"

He himself sprang as he spoke to the chest containing the grenades, while the others leaped to the netting loop-holes, Winchester in hand, with the exception of Plugger Poydras, who brought the small shell-throwing cannon

alluded to in position for firing after the manner of a bow-chaser, just alongside of where Jack Piston was perched at the guiding lines.

The next instant they were among the charging redskins at railroad speed, dealing out death and destruction on either hand, and fore and aft.

It was evidently an entirely fresh lot of Indians, who knew nothing of Electric Mule methods on the war-path, and in making the charge upon it had been prompted by an overweening curiosity rather than anything else.

At all events, they were upset, smashed, crushed, knocked out of the saddle, and flabbergasted generally with appalling precision and dispatch.

Then, just at the critical moment, bang! went the cannon, and an elongated giant-powder shell, splendidly delivered among a bewildered group of the rascals, burst so effectively that every red devil composing it seemed incontinently blown into smithereens.

Still, yet another and larger band had meantime charged down from the mountains, and in another moment the equipage was more or less impeded by a fresh horde, which seemed to know no fear in spite of the murderous havoc that was so industriously wrought among them.

There was a momentary pause, the car, while still dealing out its death-missives incessantly, almost tipped over in crossing a heap of the slain, while Snorter strained laboriously in the thills, with a couple of wriggling savages impaled upon his forehead horn; another caught up at the nape of the neck between his teeth, and the carcass of a disemboweled pony hanging half over his back.

At this critical emergency there was an unearthly trumpeting-whistling noise, a demoniac roar—

"An earthquake-boom,
Like the terrible trumpet-shock
Of Ragnarock
In the Day of Doom!"

and the Steam Centipede was out of the mountains, and off over the plain for the robber rendezvous at Blue Cut, with his spinning, many-legged and humping rush, like a boss dragon of destruction out of the very jaws of death.

Controlled entirely from within, with not a man in sight on his back, he headed away and flew over the ground as if instinct with a monstrous life, intelligence, and malignity in his own individuality.

To still further complicate matters, the storm, which had been threatening, at this same moment burst over the scene with abrupt and tremendous fury—crashing thunder, blazing electric flashes, howling wind and lashing rain.

"Steady all!" called out the young inventor's clear voice of command, while the equipage was promptly backed and slid away from its temporary obstruction, and a fresh bomb-shell sent the fresh attacking horde scattering this way and that. "Now for it!"

Simultaneously, all force that could be mustered was cracked on, and Snorter was sent off in hot and close pursuit of the Centipede.

It was at such a mad pace that the redskins were speedily left far behind, and with doubtless quite enough to attend to in looking after their dead and wounded.

For the first half-hour or so, Snorter steadily gained upon his fugitive, but, later on, when just beginning to lap the latter's odd looking tail-end, the thundering pace held by both was equal, nor could the trifling interval be lessened further by so much as a jot.

CHAPTER VII.

AN INTERRUPTED HOLD-UP—HAIRTRIGGER HAL SCORES "ONE."

"All right, then," called out Captain Tom, Jr., in one of the lulls in the thunder-crashes, the car having been tented over against the driving rain. "If we can't overhaul the steam critter, let's see if we can't either hump him along a bit, or blow a hole into the stern end of him. Here, Plugger, I think I will try a little shell-practice myself."

Poydras accordingly got the carronade into position again, and the young inventor began to let fly at the fugitive monster's posteriors with various missiles and explo-

sives which he had contrived and provided for some such an emergency.

The first essay was with a steel-pointed, elongated shell, charged with giant-powder, tenpenny nails, and scrap-iron, forming a bolt about sixteen inches in length by about five in diameter.

It struck the fleeing Centipede squarely in the buttocks, so to speak, impinged in the steam-escape orifice there situated, and then flew to pieces, but without raising a hair of him, so to speak, or having any other effect than to dance and scoot him along a little faster for the moment.

Then there came a chorus of hollow and mocking laughs from somewhere forward in the monster's interior.

"Laugh away!" shouted Captain Tom, Jr., indignantly. "Our bombshell supply isn't exhausted by a long shot, and he laughs best who laughs last."

The next shot was crammed with buckshot, and contained nitro-glycerine as the explosive.

It struck the Centipede in exactly the same place as its predecessor, and fairly hoisted his hind-quarters high off the ground for the instant, so as to show his entire underpinning of wheels and legs working and wriggling, but still apparently without loosening a scale, plate, joint, or rivet, or in any way shaking the thing's internal economy out of gear.

Another derisive laugh from within.

The young inventor wiped the combined perspiration and storm-spray from off his streaming brow.

"We'll try him next with a dynamite hazelnut," he exclaimed between his set teeth. "And if that doesn't knock the vital sawdust out of him, the Lord only knows what will."

He signed as he spoke toward a yet longer and more formidable looking shell than either of the others, and, the powder-charge having already been supplied, Plugger Poydras promptly whacked it into the gun at the breach.

Coonskin Cullen here stepped forward, and, steadying himself with one hand on Driver Jack Piston's shoulder and the other on the gun carriage, managed to touch his hat respectfully.

"Mought I make a suggestion as ter a slightual variation in ther next bull's-eye attempt, sir?" he asked. "It's Hairtrigger Hal's idee, too."

"Certainly," replied Captain Tom, Jr., pausing in the direction of the gun. "What is it you would suggest?"

"Ye mark, sir, the sorter overhang er ther critter's tail-piece, which looks like a lobster's tail-curve when fust soused inter a pot fer b'ilin'?"

"To be sure."

"Wall, our suggestion is thet ye look fer ther bull's-eye summers back in under thet tail-piece, 'stead er bangin' away any longer at ther steam-escape, what hasn't seemed ter do any good."

"All right, then; here goes!"

The dynamite bolt was delivered accordingly, and with somewhat better success.

While it did not seem to check the monster's speed, or rattle up his bowels to any perceptible degree, it tore out in exploding a pretty good-sized bay-window in his hinder part, wherein the blanched, scared faces of two or three of the outlaws were glimpsed for an instant before disappearing.

"Good!" shouted Tom Edison. "Now, Jack," he slapped Piston on the shoulder, "you simply must get one extra spurt out of Snorter, if it breaks his back. Good Lord! what a chance for one of his unicorn home-thrusts in yonder."

"I'll do my best, sir," replied Jack, taking a long breath; and he shut down on the force regulator to the very lowest notch.

The spurt was achieved.

With an extra tail-flirt and a fog-horn bray, the Electric Mule fairly bounded forward.

His enormous forehead-spear shot into the opening, piercing the flying monster to the very entrails, and when it emerged again—as "Centy," thus stimulated or pricked on from behind, also put on an extra spurt—an unfortunate outlaw was skewered, writhing and wriggling upon it, like a caterpillar on a bodkin.

But that was all.

The heroic Snorty essayed, in addition, to bite a steel plate or two out of the fugitive's lobster-overhang, but in vain.

The Steam Centipede had at the same instant leaped his entire length, with a fierce squeal of rage and pain, whirled in his tracks, making a complete about-face, with the rapidity of lightning, and, front to front, the artificial wonders crashed together with a stupendous shock.

It caused both to recoil, Snorty with his unicorn-spear in splinters, and snapped off at the root, "Centy" with his remaining horn knocked away, and seemingly an entire side of his iron skull smashed in, like a battered pumpkin.

But the latter was, for all that, the first to recover; there was a Red Ripper hurrah from somewhere in his interior, and then he was off again on the old course at a mile-a-minute clip.

"No use, I suppose," growled the young inventor, discontentedly, as the Electric Mule was again put upon the stern chase, but with a widened interval of several hundred yards between. "All we can hope for now is to reach our goal at Blue Cut on or about the same time."

Nearly every man of the crew had been dashed about the car by the force of the shock, like so many billiard-balls in a game of pool.

"I shed hope so!" grunted Coonskin Cullen, picking himself up out of the open ammunition chest and ruefully rubbing the back of his head. "Bust me crust 'f I wudn't ruther tackle er Rocky Mountain grizzly on a empty stomach, 'ith a mad steer throwed in fer dessert."

Plugger Poydras relieved himself of the gun carriage, which had been thrown across the back of his neck after spilling him into a pot of axle-grease, and was equally expressive of his chagrin; while Whang-Bang, who had been shot into Donnerblitz's midriff with the force of a catapult, to the serious loss of equanimity for both, mildly assured himself that he still retained his pigtail, while remarking, "Allee lightee, if Melican man can stand it, so can Chinaman, but I'd lather lun a lace with a Custom House opium-glabber any day in the weekee."

Lengthy Liston and Hairtrigger Hal, however, whose lightness of build had enabled them to pass through the ordeal less painfully, only laughed at their companions' complaints, while Jack Piston, who had stuck to his driver's seat like a bur, grimly observed that Snorty had had decidedly the best of the butting game, at all events, and was still working along like clock-work.

The elemental tempest had, by this time also ceased, or had more likely been outstripped by the mad race that had been begun in the midst of it; leagues upon leagues had been covered by the speeding monsters, the prospect ahead was bathed in the rich glow of the setting sun, and presently a general exclamation of surprise and gratification burst from the Snorty crew.

An eminence was being crossed from which a wide extent of rather open country, with a glorious river flashing tortuously through its midst, was disclosed to the view.

A railroad also threaded the vista, and then, far away along its line to the southward, a train was seen to have come to a stand-still, around and in the close vicinity of which a large number of mounted men were engaged in a desperate conflict.

"Blue Cut, and the fight for the express treasure already on," shouted Captain Tom, Jr., after a swift examination with his field-glass. "Yes, and, by Jupiter! the Red Rippers seem to be getting the best of the sheriff's men, if anything. Oh, if the Steam Centipede should get there first."

He set his teeth hard, while steadying himself at Jack Piston's side, and watching the course of the Centipede with something very like a groan.

The latter was by this time half a mile ahead, and it was obvious that not an added hoof-beat could be got out of Snorter's speed, which was already that of the coursing wind itself.

"Patience, captain, patience!" replied Jack, consolingly. "We're doing our best, and no mortal or immortal man or mule can do any better than that. The Centipede can't get there more'n a minute in advance of us any way."

Only about five miles were yet to be covered.

The contestants round about the train saw the two levi-

athans making for them over the open prairie, and seemed to redouble their respective efforts for the mastery before either of them should arrive to turn the scale of victory one way or the other.

The Centipede's crew had now come up out of his interior upon his back, their red girdles and burnished weapons gleaming in the ruddy light.

Among the Snorter crew, Hairtrigger Hal had made ready with his favorite Winchester and six-shooters with especial care, and, moreover, a long-bladed, keen-looking hunting-knife, without any sheath, was stuck in his white sash, while his black eyes and effeminately beautiful face wore a set, eager look, like that of a young blood-hound when first flushing its victim.

Hurrah!

The Steam Centipede was now among the battling horsemen, knocking the sheriff's men right and left, while several of the triumphant Rippers were already handing down packages of treasure out of the smashed express car.

But hurrah again! and three times three with a tiger!

Snorter, the invincible, was now also among them, once more evening up the posse's chances.

The next instant he had bitten a chunk out of Centy's mailed flank, and was half on top of him, beating the devil's tattoo on his ugly carcass with his pile-driver hoofs, while the deadly rifles poured forth their leaden messengers right and left from the steel-netted car.

Captain Karl, Jacko, and the rest had been swept off their pet monster's back at the first smash, while nearly every fighter in the car had momentarily lost his feet.

Then, just how it happened no one ever knew, the car was overturned, Electric Mule and Steam Centipede were mixed up in a sort of cyclonic scrimmage, everything was in a delirium, amid echoing shots and flashing blades, and the fight was over, with the Red Rippers finally worsted, and the treasure secure, though with everything in such a tangle of confusion that it required some little time to appreciate the real results of the struggle.

Captain Tom, Jr., slightly stunned, but otherwise uninjured, was one of the first to scramble to his feet out of the wreck.

As he did so, Major Pat Kelly—his cheek furrowed by a robber's bullet, and crawling smilingly from under his slain horse to achieve the courtesy—grasped his hand with a fervent clutch.

"Nobly done, Captan Edison," he exclaimed. "It's little better than a stand-off, to be sure; but the treasure is safe, and, good Lord! what would have become of us but for the timely arrival of your Snorting Wonder of the Plains and his glorious gang?"

Captain Tom, Jr., scratched his head a little bewilderedly.

The Steam Centipede had altogether disappeared.

The electric car was just being righted with some difficulty by Jack Piston, Plugger Poydras, and others, seemingly without having sustained any material damage.

Snorter was laying on his side, pawing madly at the air and braying dismally, while Lengthy Liston and Coonskin Cullen were at his head in an effort to get him on his feet again.

"Ther old hoss is all right, sir," called out the veteran scout, with commendable cheerfulness. "He's jest a leetle knocked up an' winded, thet's all. Whoa, boy! bully boy!"

Donnerblitz had killed two men before going down with the upset, and was phlegmatically complacent accordingly.

Whang-Bang, being a trifle off his nut with excitement, evidently imagined that he was still in the thick of the fight.

At all events, he was enjoyably spinning around on one foot, like a teetotum; with his dumb-bell weighted pigtail flying off at a tangent.

Dead and dying men and horses, most of the former wearing the distinguishing Red Ripper sash, were scattered everywhere.

From one of these prostrate human forms, Hairtrigger Hal was slowly disengaging himself after a desperate knife-to-knife struggle in which he had come off the victor.

He slowly rose, drew his hunting knife out of his foe-man's lifeless breast, and held it aloft.

"One!" he said, solemnly, while kissing the gory blade,

with upturned eyes. "The other still lives, but my vengeance will overtake him, too."

The slain bravo's face was upturned to the lingering sunset light.

It was the face of Red-eyed Ramon, Captain Karl's Mexican first lieutenant in the terrible Red Ripper organization.

Hairtrigger Hal's pursuit of his father's murderers had not swerved, and thus on the vengeance list he had scored one.

CHAPTER VIII.

SNORTER'S FELL PURSUIT—UNEXPECTED SPORT BY THE WAY.

Over twenty outlaws were dead or dying upon the field, and as many of Kelly's posse had been wounded, some of them desperately so.

The Snorter crew had escaped serious injury with their accustomed good luck.

Captain Karl, the giant Jacko, and the bulk of the Red Ripper rank and file had disappeared, together with the Steam Centipede, immediately following upon their defeat.

But in what direction had the Steam Centipede escaped? that was the principal question that Tom Edison, Jr., and his gallant Snorter crew were now concerned about.

There was naturally a good deal of uncertainty as to this, owing to the dire confusion and tumult, together with the fading daylight, under which the retreat had been effected.

It was the general opinion, however, that the Centipede, after disengaging itself from the tangle with the Electric Mule, had steamed off due north in a decidedly crippled condition, while many of the mounted outlaws had doubtless accompanied it, though many others had been seen to scatter off in different directions.

"I know where they're off to—I feel certain of it," suddenly exclaimed Hairtrigger Hal, his dark face lighting up. "They're off to Deep Creek Mountains, in the Indian Territory. It was always Captain Karl's intention to make his last stand there, if pushed to the wall."

This was enough, or nearly enough, for Tom Edison, Jr. "All aboard!" he shouted commandingly, after asking a few questions as to the locality indicated.

The car had by this time been thoroughly rehabilitated, and Snorter was once more attached to it, seemingly as impatient and energetic as ever to be off, if a trifle stiff in the joints and sore about the head.

The sheriff and railroad people were astounded when Captain Tom, Jr., announced his determination to take up the pursuit of the robbers and their Steam Centipede, without a moment's unnecessary delay.

"But look here, this is simple madness!" cried Major Kelly, reaching up over the car to grasp the young inventor's hand when the Snorter adventurers were about to whip up and away. "Deep Creek Mountains? Why, that's the worst fork of the Canadian, in the very heart of the Wichitas' reservation."

"Uncle Sam won't object to having the Red Rippers wiped out in his Indian Territory, I suppose!" replied Captain Tom, Jr., smiling.

"But it's four or five hundred miles away."

"And our Electric Mule is fleet of foot and tireless of limb."

"But, man alive, you don't know the country up there!"

"Hairtrigger Hal does; and, besides, both Coonskin Cullen and Plugger Poydras have trapped there on the sly in times past."

"But the intervening region is still swarming with hostile redskins."

"They haven't made much by tackling us so far."

"But look here, the express and railroad people will be ready to reward you fellows handsomely for your share in to day's work. You and your Snorting Wonder will be lionized in Fort Worth, Houston, and all the other big towns, besides——"

"Business first, pleasure afterward."

"But——"

At this juncture, however, Captain Tom, Jr., laughingly waved him off, and then, with a last toot and a parting flirt of the patriotic tail, Snorter & Company, heading

away due north, disappeared amid the gathering darkness.

"I feel happy," said Hairtrigger Hal, in his low melodious voice, and his dark face shone beamingly as he looked up to Captain Tom, Jr., while murmuring the words, "I feel happy—so happy!"

"Why?" was the surprised response.

"Because," with a touch upon the long hunting-knife in his belt, "it was on the Canadian River, senor, that my father met his treacherous death, and it is on or near the same spot that I am destined to finally avenge him. I feel it, I know it. Mattaweetah's restless heart will then be at peace."

"Is that your Indian name—Mattaweetah?"

"Yes, senor capitano."

"But that sounds like a woman's name."

The mysterious vengeance-seeker started, but smiled in his strange way.

"Does it?" he said, softly. "Well, the Apache speech is a strange one, senor capitano."

The night had closed in very dark, so that hap-hazard traveling would have been risky, even aided by the flash-lights with which the expedition was provided, so that but a few leagues were traversed before the party went into camp.

At dawn of the following day the route was resumed, and so expeditiously that, even with rough traveling for much of the way, the railroad crossing of Red River and the Indian Territory was reached by noonday.

This, too, strange as it may seem, without encountering a single war-party, or even a single Indian, for that matter, though there were frequent signs of their depredations in the way of burned ranch buildings and devastated farms.

At this point, however, they came upon something far more satisfactory—the trail of their arch-enemy, the Steam Centipede.

A group of friendly Indian hunters, from the Chickasaw nation, were met on the farther side of the river, who had seen the monster, accompanied by twenty or thirty mounted men, ford the stream a little higher up at about daybreak.

The machine was making fast time, though apparently badly crippled, and the horsemen also seemed to be pretty thoroughly worn out, though they confessed to having exchanged horses a few miles further back, which was tantamount to saying that they had stolen fresh ones.

As for the Indian war, the hunters were rather uncommunicative, though it was gathered from what they admitted that a battle between the hostiles and the troops was imminent on one side or another of the border-line, forty or fifty miles to the westward.

Greatly encouraged at what they learned, the Snorter party pushed on at full speed, and went into camp two hours later on Wild Horse Creek, a picturesque ranch of the Wichita River, in the heart of the richest of the Chickasaw hunting-grounds.

Here they were visited by a number of the civilized Chickasaws, who were very friendly and manifested much sympathy with the declared object of the expedition, but counseled a speedy withdrawal back into Texas, lest the hostiles, of whom they stood in mortal fear, might be tempted to pursue them over the line, to the consequent devastation of the neighboring farms.

"My red friends, be under no apprehensions whatever," said Captain Tom Edison, Jr., addressing his camp visitors consolingly. "The hostiles have already had such an experience with us that our mere presence here is a sufficient protection for your properties and industries. But, if any of them should have the temerity to pursue us hither, we will show you about the tallest kind of war-paint extermination that you ever saw, heard, read, or dreamed of. True," urbanely, "outlaw and Steam Centipede smashing is our chosen and pet gait for the time being. But nothing comes amiss to us in the fighting line, and our Electric Mule here is on hand for purely practical, rather than ornamental, purposes."

He thereupon sprang upon Snorter's back, and put him through a number of exercises for the edification of his guests, whose wonder thereat is better imagined than described.

"Oh, he's a snorter, no less in action than in name," cried the young inventor, dismounting, and patting the wonder's neck affectionately, after jumping him back and forth over the creek, and causing him to knock down a young tree or two in the course of his playful exhibition. "But you ought to have seen him before he lost his forehead-spike and that left ear of his. He can't help appearing a little off color now, as you perceive. Wouldn't one of you chiefs like to mount him for amusement?"

No, with thanks. The Chickasaw visitors were not unused to horse and mule flesh of the ordinary breeds, with which they would rest content. Not any Electric Mule for them for the time being, at all events.

The friendly greeting was still in progress when Lengthy Liston came rushing into camp with an unexpected announcement.

He feared that Donnerblitz and Whang-Bang, who had gone in search of game, were treed by wolves or some other ferocious beasts, in a certain wild ravine a mile or two up the creek.

At all events, he had heard them shouting, as if for help, mingled with snarls and howls, but had not ventured to go to their assistance.

The Indian visitors arose with much animation of manner.

"It must be the great pack of mountain wolves that have been making such havoc up in the Kickapoo country," they said. "Ha! we must look out for our flocks and herds. Here they are down upon us, and we altogether unprepared for them."

"We'll see what we can do toward stirrin' 'em up a little, offhand," cried Captain Tom, Jr., again leaping lightly on Snorter's back. "Here, Hairtrigger Hal, fetch some weapons and get on behind me. Coonskin, both you and Plugger ought to be able to borrow ponies for the occasion from our Indian friends here. Lengthy and Piston can look after the camp. Now come on, all of you!"

The wolf-hunt, thus improvised, turned out to be an unexpected pleasure, no less than an immense success.

The wolves in question were by no means the cowardly coyotes, or prairie wolves. Far from it. They were of the great black gray, gaunt mountain variety, some of them standing as tall as a Siberian blood-hound; dangerously formidable even singly, and when in united packs a holy terror to wild game and domestic flocks and herds alike, to say nothing of the luckless solitary hunter or herder who chances to cross their remorseless path.

Donnerblitz and the Chinaman were found to have really been treed in the ravine, by the howling pack, just as Lengthy Liston had suspected.

Having dropped their guns, after shooting a few of the wolves, they had taken to the same tree for refuge, and were now sprawled out, helpless and terrified, even upon the same overhanging branch, with the ravenous pack yelping, yowling, and snapping their jaws beneath them by the hundred, while some of the brutes were even gnawing and tearing at the base of the tree in which their prospective victims had found shelter.

"Mein Gott in Himmel!" the German was heard to groan out despairingly, as some of the rescuing party came within hearing, without distracting the attention of the wolves; "ish durn about vair blay inteed? Undt haff I peen eating saussages all my lifetimes, vor to be durned into dog-meat myselluf in mein oldt age? Py Chimminindtly! it vos too pad. Petter to meed sigsteen Sdeam Zendipedes dan to pe dorn to bieces undt jawed oop into hash-gravies undt Irish-sdews py dese vild undt vicked vild animals, all der dime."

"Allea lightee!" chattered Chang-Bang, in response. "Wishee I was safe back with Snorter once moree. But then if Melican man won't come to lescue of poor Johns Chinaman, allee samee to me."

At about this time, however, Tom Edison, Jr., and his improvised nimrods suddenly dashed in among the wolves with indescribable fury, and the treed unfortunates were saved.

The slaughter that was effected among the wolves, before they were put to panic-stricken flight, was simply immense, and more than half of it was caused by the indom-

itable Electric Mule and the brace of hunters bestriding him.

They were crushed and trampled under his furious hoofs by the score. Others were seized and bitten in two, as a game terrier disposes of rats in a pit. Many more, mistaking him for a real pachyderm, jumped impotently at his iron flanks or gutta-percha throat, only to be shot, stabbed, or clubbed to death, as the jolliest of pastimes, by the delectated youths on his back. The other members of the hunt were only less remarkably successful.

The gross result was the rescue of the Dutchman and the Celestial from their perilous position, and a vast accumulation of wolf-pelts, every one of which meant twenty-five cents each in the way of government, or twice as much if cured and kept for slower sale to the agents of the furriers.

The latter were all presented to the friendly Chickasaws for their hospitable kindnesses.

Then the Snorter party returned to camp in time for a hearty supper, after which, sentries being duly posted, they turned in for the night. An attack from a wandering band of hostiles aroused them at the first gray of dawn.

It was one of the fugitive remnants of the combined hostile forces which had been tackled and badly worsted by the Government troops on the upper Red River at sunset of the previous evening, just as the solitary hunters at the railroad crossing of that stream had predicted would be the case.

CHAPTER IX.

INDIANS AGAIN—THE TRAGEDY OF DEEP CREEK.

Our Snorter friends were, fortunately, not taken by surprise.

Th sentries were not caught napping, the Electric Mule and car-attachment were got under way in good season, and almost in less time than it takes to tell it the redskins were repulsed and scattered with great slaughter.

Then a detachment of cavalry came thundering up in time to complete the punishment, and to thank the little expedition for their extraordinary work.

"This last uprising is about ended," said the officer in command of the troop, and much of that desired end has been accomplished by you clever fellows with your Electric Mule. Everywhere we have found evidences of the terror which it has caused among the hostiles. Captain Edison, your invention is, indeed, a Snorting Wonder of the Plains, and you and your gallant associates deserve something far more substantial in the way of reward than a complimentary vote of thanks on the part of the Government."

"Oh, captain, we have simply done our best in a patriotic way," replied the young inventor, while explaining the construction of the mule and car to his military visitors. "But Indian-smashing has, after all, been only an incident in our snorting career, as you might say."

And then, while patting the neck of the prancing and life-like Snorter caressingly, he modestly told of the recent battle with the Red Rippers and their Steam Centipede at Blue Cut, and of those which had preceded it.

The officer in command of the troopers was Captain George Wallace, of the Seventh Cavalry, who was destined to lose his life so heroically later on at the battle of Wounded Knee, in the great Sioux uprising of Southern Dakota.

"It seems there is to be no limit to wonders in this scientific age," he said, looking over Snorter with the inquisitive and admiring eyes of a thoroughly educated military man. "If we have electric mules and steam centipedes on land, why should we not have artificial whales at sea, or electric birds to transport us through the air?"

"Why not, indeed?" cried Captain Tom, Jr., laughing. "At all events, there is no law against it, and I shall doubtless yet turn my inventive talent in one or another of the directions that you suggest."

"How I should like to be with you when Snorter engages in his next fight," exclaimed the officer.

"Well, you won't have to follow any further than Deep Creek Mountains to gratify your curiosity, I fancy." And

Captain Tom, Jr., went on to speak of the prospects and situation ahead.

"Deep Creek Mountains, eh?" said Captain Wallace, knitting his brows. "What, and you anticipate that the Red Rippers will make their last stand there? A wild section, and one with which I am, fortunately, somewhat familiar. By Jove if I can be on hand to witness your next tilt with the Steam Centipede, consistently with my military duty, you can expect me there. And our army authorities have also several private bones of their own to pick with Captain Karl and his cut-throat crew."

He then hurried away with his command, after taking an account of the number of hostiles who had been killed, as a basis of an official report to his superiors.

There were too many dead men lying around the camp to be conducive to a good appetite, so the little expedition pushed on twenty miles farther, to Rush Creek, where Coonskin Cullen easily bagged a fat young deer and several brace of partridges, and a most excellent hunters' breakfast was indulged in, with the best of digestion to follow.

Deep Creek Mountains are an insignificant but wildly savage range on either side the stream of that name, in the extreme northern corner of the Wichitas Reservation of the Indian Territory, and not far from the present Oklahoma boundary.

Even the Indians of the reservation themselves had settled and explored but little thereabouts at the time of our story. And yet it was a veritable paradise of game, besides abounding in deep canons, intricate gorges, secret valleys, shut away among stupendous precipices, and all but inaccessible steeps, such as had doubtless caused the Red Rippers to select it as their chief fastness-retreat, which they hoped would render them impregnable to all comers.

The locality was fully a hundred miles to the north-west of Rush Creek, and the country to be traversed was very much broken up, thickly interspersed with forest tracts, and crossed by many streams.

Therefore, notwithstanding that Snorter was put to his best licks of speed wherever the nature of the country would allow it, another nightfall was descending upon the solitudes when the expedition came within view of the range, and made their camp on the open plain skirting its southern base.

The night passed without incident, and the entire succeeding day was spent in searching for the outlaw trail, chiefly under the guidance of Coonskin Cullen and Hair-trigger Hal, but without success.

The next night, however, it was vastly different.

Camp had been pitched at the mouth of a canon, in the near interior of which the precaution had been taken to hide away both the Electric Mule and the battle-car, while dummy representatives of these, composed of brushwood and canvas, and calculated to deceive as to their true character in the obscurity of an uncertain light, had been constructed in close proximity to the smoldering camp-fire, around which such members of the Snorter crew as were not on guard were disposed in slumber.

Back of the canon was the mountain solitude; before it stretched away the open plain.

These wise precautions proved not only a trap for the enemy, but also the salvation of the little band of outlaw smashers.

The night was partly clouded with a fluctuating moon and starlight in consequence.

Soon after midnight Hairtrigger Hal, who was on guard at the south side of the canon-opening, shot a seeming black bear that was humping along leisurely toward the camp in a rather suspicious manner, and, kicking aside the enveloping skin, disclosed a Red Ripper spy, wounded to death by the shot, as its inside filling.

Scarcely had the camp roused itself, as a result of this alarm, before Coonskin Cullen, patrolling the opposite side, also fired, aiming straight up into the pitch-darkness of the gorge, and came bounding in, with an Apache yell.

"Hyar comes ther critter," he shouted, purposely investing his announcement with a terror which he was far from feeling, in accordance with a prearrangement in support of the adopted ruse. "Save yourselves, fellers! Out with Snorter, an' then inter ther war-wagon with ye."

The demoniac steam-squeal of the Steam Centipede had, indeed, already echoed and re-echoed through the solitudes with its appalling screech.

"To cover!" roared Captain Tom Edison, Jr., in the same line of deception, and himself leading the dash away from the fire in the direction where the real Snorter and car were concealed, with Jack Piston having everything in readiness for an emergency. "No time for anything else now."

Then the Centipede, with Captain Karl and a dozen or more of his braves in full view on his back, and followed by about a score of mounted Red Rippers, came charging down out of the canon's remoter depths like a hurricane.

"Hurrah!" howled the crazy voice of the ex-air-pirate. "We've caught 'em napping at last. Yonder's their fighting mule and wagon, unattended. Have at 'em, Centy! You've the old grudges to pay back. Rip 'em up, tear 'em to pieces, knock 'em into fifty cocked hats."

Then almost immediately ensued the yells of disappointment and rage as the Brobdingnagian insect trampled, gored, and tore among the dummies, to the speedy revelation of their humbug character.

And by this time the entire Snorter crew were on board their equipage, with everything in readiness for the reprisal.

"Steady, all?" rang out the young inventor's clear voice of command. "We have 'em where we want 'em. Now, then!"

Then there was another rush from the canon, or rather the inner mouth of it, and, with his thunder of hoofs and blood-curdling bray, the Electric Mule was upon his scientific rival's rear like a million of bricks.

Cougar Karl & Co., however, had popped down under hatches in time to save their individual carcasses from the storm of rifle-bullets that simultaneously poured out from the network of the battle car.

As a consequence, the contest that ensued was equally brief and unsatisfactory.

In the first place, the obscurity had grown dense, only to be occasionally relieved by the electric blaze of Snorter's saucer-eyes.

In the next place, the mounted men quickly beat a retreat on discovering the nature of the trap that had been sprung upon them.

Snorter, it is true, got a big biting-grip on Centy's hip, besides shaking him up smartly in the shock of the collision; but this was quickly shaken off by a squirming twist, and then, when the car's flash light was at last turned on with an illuminating burst he was once more humping and racing back into his canon lair at a speed that defied at least instant pursuit.

Then a great exclamation of surprise burst from the Snorter crew.

The same electric flash briefly revealed the figure of a man, holding hard to the peak of the vanishing monster's tail.

It was Hairtrigger Hal, his faithful Winchester securely slung to his back, his hunting-knife between his teeth.

He was seen to silently wave his hand once as he disappeared.

CHAPTER X.

FRONT TO FRONT FOR THE LAST TIME—THE LONG AND FIERCE RIVALRY DECIDED.

"Why, the young man must be crazy," exclaimed Captain Tom, Jr., as the party once more took possession of their camping ground.

"Leave him alone, cap," advised Coonskin Cullen, philosophically. "He's on'y red-hot arter Louis-Gubrious-Cougar-Karl's scalp, thet's all. When he gits it, he'll come back ter us, hunky-dory, right-side-up-with-care, an C. O. D. I know Hairtrigger Hal's sort, cap."

"Or he'll leave his scalp behind him, which is quite another thing," growled the young inventor, still discontentedly. "I don't like the youth having taken that risk, at all."

The party laid on their arms for the remainder of the night, in expectation of a possible second attack, but none was attempted.

After an early breakfast, they were about starting up into the canon by the gloaming light, on the track of the Steam Centipede, when there was a clamor of hoof-beats, and Captain Wallace put in a reappearance over the plain from the southward, at the head of a squad of twenty-five dragoons.

"I'm on hand again, as I half-promised to be, you see!" he gayly cried, grasping the young inventor's hand. "Am I too late, or too early, to be in at the death in your Snorting Wonder's fresh performance, Captain Edison?"

"Both one and the other, or neither, just as you look at it," replied Tom, Jr., with a laugh. "You are too late for a bit of a scrap that we had with our steam rival last midnight, which didn't amount to much, after all; and you are a little too previous for the more conclusive shindig which we hope to bring on at the earliest possible moment."

And he forthwith explained matters in detail.

"Hallo!" said the officer, looking around him; "I ought to know this locality. No—yes! If it isn't Ramshead Canon, may I be shot! Don't you remark that queer-shaped ledge up yonder bearing some resemblance to a ram's or sheep's head?"

"Yes—quite a resemblance, too. So you know this spot?"

"I should say so—one of the queerest and most intricate gorges in the whole territory. So the Rippers and their insect-locomotive issued out of Ramshead to attack you, eh? But, look here, you are not thinking of trailing 'em back into those gloomy recesses?"

"Just what we were on the point of doing."

"Madness, my dear boy, sheer madness! They'd ambuscade you to your destruction, sure as a gun! Now, I've been here before, and so, I'll bet my head, have the majority of this gallant squad under my command. It was away back in the eventful 'seventies, when I was a new-fledged second lieutenant, and—but no matter. I know a game worth two of yours. And, moreover, by Jove! I would like to assist even better than to be a mere looker-on in the wiping out of these villains. You see, they robbed and nearly murdered our division paymaster, eight months ago, into the bargain. Now, what do you say?"

"Try to be a little more coherent, captain," said Tom Edison, Jr., with a smile. "I've no doubt I shall agree to your proposition when I hear what it is."

"Well taken!" cried the officer, laughing heartily at his own expense. "Look you, then, Cptain Edison. My men and I know Ramshead here pretty well, besides being veteran trackers and fighters. Now, we'll drive the Rippers up through the canon, while you and your Snorter proceed around the range and head 'em off at Comanche Gulch."

"Where is that?"

"The tail-opening of Ramshead here, which cuts around through the mountains in a regular horseshoe bend."

"And where is it?"

"Four miles away, around the westernmost spurs yonder. You can't miss it." And Captain Wallace went on to describe the locality in detail.

"Agreed!"

And then, as the troopers and their leader dashed on up into the canon, the Snorter party sped away around the mountain-skirts in pursuance of their part of the programme.

Just as the separation was being effected, however, there came a solitary shot from somewhere among the rocky heights far back in the canon's depths, and Donnerblitz gave a roar of pain and rage, his left arm falling helplessly to his side, with a half-spent rifle-ball buried in its fleshy part.

"Bear up, old fellow!" counseled Captain Tom, Jr., himself dressing the hurt as well as he could while the car sped on. "I've got the bullet out, as you see, no bone is broken, and the wound might have been far worse than it is."

"Owel ride, gaptain," replied Hans, bearing up accordingly, though not with an altogether Spartan indifference. "I doan't gare vor der voond so much ash I do vor der indignities of peing zhot py a tam oudlaw sgunk! Oh, chimminy! if I only had my oldt plunderpuss mit me—der von, you remember, gaptain, dot mein grandfader's second guzzin vought mit at Vaterloo—I'd plow all der Ret Ribbers indo gocked hadts undt smasherness, all der

dimes, aindt id? Undt how low is dot vor high-low-Zhack undt 'der came, poys? knock 'em up undt sedt 'em down again; hit him vonce more, vor he's got no friendts; dere aindt no vlies on me; I aindt qvite in der soup-plate yet; undt efferyding is hungky undt der goose hangs high aoudt, py Chingo!"

"Ah, yes!" replied Captain Tom, Jr., laughing; "but I fancy Snorter will do the business for you even better than your ancestral blunderbuss would, Hans."

The going was frightfully bad around the mountains, but, for all that, Comanche Gulch—a savagely walled rift in the barrier, with a mad mountain torrent bursting out in a succession of roaring waterfalls at one side of it—was reached inside of two hours.

None too soon at that.

Almost immediately thereafter a hubbub of far-away shots was heard, as an indication that the troopers were attacking the outlaws in their mid-most lair.

Fortunately, the plain directly before the gulch-opening was free of obstructions and almost as level as a floor, with the torrent rushing away in a final leap on the western side, and forming an all but impassable barrier there.

The ground was, therefore, admirable for patrolling duty, and the Electric Mule was accordingly at once put in motion back and forth across the mouth of the pass.

Zigzagging thus at the top of his tremendous speed, with the sheltered riflemen in the car at his back in readiness, Snorter appeared at a splendid and most formidable advantage. And yet all was prepared to let him slip loose for individual action at an instant's notice, should that be desirable, while Captain Tom, Jr., in his chain-armor suit, and with a fresh sapling-spear awaiting his grasp, also held himself ready to mount him in such a case.

The confusion of shots drew nearer and nearer.

Then a mob of panic-stricken Red Rippers first made their appearance, dashing down the gulch for an egress, but only to be shot down, tramped under the iron hoofs, or driven back upon the equally sure death that was upon them from behind.

While this was going on, there was a long, wailing sort of a squeal, and the Steam Centipede with Captain Karl, Jackc, and others on his back, but Hairtrigger Hal nowhere in sight as yet—came thundering and rushing out of the pass.

"Unhitch!" commanded Captain Tom, Jr., springing upon Snorter's back, lance in rest. "Now for it!"

At the same instant that Snorter sprang free, swerving a little to one side, Plugger Poydras let go at the Centipede with a dynamite shell from the car-gun, the projectile exploding directly under the monster's jaw, and hoisting him up about six feet at the fore-end, after which the car wheeled to and fro across with its riflemen pumping out bullets for all they were worth.

Scarcely had the shell exploded when Captain Tom, Jr., made his initial charge upon Centy with Snorter at full tilt, the lance glancing over the monster's polished head and along his back.

Captain Karl succeeded in jumping out of the way of it, and had hardly touched the ground when he was pounced upon by Hairtrigger Hal, knife in hand, from some place of concealment in among the Centipede's legs.

Jacko, immediately behind, was less fortunate, however, being instantly impaled on the lance, where he squirmed and swore, impotently brandishing his razor-blade, for a few seconds, and then fell off, limp, lifeless, and completely cut in two.

At the next tilt, Captain Tom, Jr., struck the rival monster squarely in the eye, forcing him sprawlingly half over the torrent-chasm, where another shell struck him full in the exposed stomach, causing him to blow up into a thousand fragments.

But alas for the victorious and indomitable Snorter.

Seeing Hairtrigger Hal seemingly getting the worst of a rough-and-tumble fight with the outlaw leader, at this juncture, Captain Tom, Jr., sprang from his saddle-seat and ran to his assistance.

Snorter, left to his own devices, was prancing back to his place in the battle-wagon thills when a last shell from the cannon—fired in the midst of enshrouding smoke,

which had veiled the results of the preceding shot—struck him full in the breast, exploding there.

It was the end of the noble Electric Mule, no less than of the powerful rival whom he had conquered at last.

A rearing plunge, a last bray from the mighty lungs, a rending intestinal explosion, and he, too, disappeared in a shower of flying fragments.

But the battle was over, the destruction of the Red Ripper band complete and assured.

Captain Karl, the ex-air-pirate—no doubt about his fate this time—was dead on the ground, with the avenging half-breed's knife-thrust in his heart.

But Hairtrigger Hal was also prostrate, struck by a random bullet, his slender form supported in the young inventor's arms.

He made a feeble sign of protest, turning aside his face, as they started to open his vestment at the neck to examine his hurt.

Then the rough men themselves turned away their faces, embarrassed and respectful.

There was a revelation.

Hairtrigger Hal, *nee* Mattaweetah, the Apache half-blood, was not a handsome young man, but a beautiful young woman.

"Forgive me the deception, senor capitano," she murmured, seizing Captain Tom, Jr.'s hand, and kissing it: "It was not a father's, but a lover's, murder that I avenged. I—I feared to tell you the truth, lest—lest you might refuse to let me remain with your gallant crew." And then she fainted.

A little later on, when the young woman's hurt had been cared for as well as could be expected, Tom Edison, Jr., and his companions were gathered ruefully about the scattered remains of their glorious Electric Mule when Captain Wallace clapped the young inventor on the shoulder.

"Don't mind it!" he cried, cheerfully. "True, Snorter was a noble—machine, but what of that? His career made up in splendor for what it lacked in duration; and I doubt not that your inventive genius will soon produce something yet more startling and wonderful for the revolution of civilization and warfare on our western plains."

Tom Edison, Jr., brightened up.

"By Jupiter, it shall!" he exclaimed, energetically; "and that in the shortest possible order."

[THE END.]

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